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ABSTRACT

The educational experiences and special needs of gifted girls at elementary and secondary levels are discussed. It is noted that enrollment of women in college science and mathematics courses remains disproportionately low. It is felt that girls in grades 7 and up are not encouraged to participate fully in math and science courses. Special sections of math and science courses offered for girls only, with a supportive female role model as teacher, are suggested as a more positive environment for growth that would attract gifted female students. Additional topics discussed include acceleration within subjects, skipping a grade, narrow academic specialization, identification of gifted students, and enrichment activities. (JW)

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LOOKING AT THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF GIFTED GIRLS

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There is the old saying about almost everything: people tell you that if something is fine, don't fix it. If it's working well, leave it alone.

And so it is in the case of gifted girls. Yet, before I deal with this case in its details, I must warn you that I will be offering you some heresies this morning...on this subject as well as on others.

I should also say that I will talk for the most part about gifted girls, but I will also suggest that what is good for the girl is good for the boy. There are, as you will already know, a whole range of problems that affect them both.

With regard to the education of gifted students, whether we are dealing with the California GATE programs or whether we are generally concerned about doing the best we can under existing circumstances, there are plenty of indications and symptoms of something being in need of fixing. We have programs and we have organized groups. There are still California legislators who feel that attention must indeed be paid. And when they legislate, they feel they can then leave it to professionals who will cooperate with parents to get programs into action.

Still, there are a number of things that need fixing and that must be taken into account, whether there is money or not, whether there is legislative attention or not. Some of the matters that need fixing or adjustment are not hard to find. Others may be somewhat more camouflaged. We think all is well, and we see activities that gain high approval with very little evidence except that of participants who "like" what they are

doing and that of some folks who are kept happily busy doing what the participants like! And this is where we must talk about girls and women, and examine the situation carefully.

Statistics tell us that girls are taking more courses in college in mathematics and the sciences, more than ever before. Girls and women are majoring in these subjects in greater numbers. Further, women are graduating with degrees in such areas to a greater extent than they used to.

Please note that this apparent progress has to do with colleges and universities.

This is quite heartening for those who want to see women make their way in professional careers and personal satisfaction above and beyond any previous opportunities. Statistics describe enrollments and degrees earned. They tell what's happening to women in the too-often-maligned colleges for women.

With all the self-congratulation, the evidence is still scanty and patronizing. If the data show more women than before are doing these things, the totality of the data and the reality are hardly reassuring.

One needs to ask, women are doing better compared to what? If population statistics are examined, the current "better picture" is being seen through the well-known rose-colored glasses. The population includes, roughly, half women and half men. Of those going into the "hard" sciences and the "hard" mathematics, will we find equal enrollments of women and men? Could we at this time settle for one-third or even one-fourth? The data are sadly below such figures and the reasons must be seriously sought out.

The place to look is in the earlier school years.

There is plenty of agreement today that girls in the schools between K and 12 are discouraged with regard to math and science; they are reminded that it is not socially desirable; they are considered to be less able than boys in such fields. When gifted girls take the SAT they are seen to be in the highest 5 per cent in a smaller number than are the boys.

This is surely in need of fixing!

The public school environment of girls, beginning with their first exposures to mathematics and the sciences, is most often a very supportive and nurturing one. In grades K to 6, they tend to excell in these areas, and to be a comfort to their teachers in needing almost no remediation in any area.

But conditions change when girls and boys in grades 7 and up meet on the fields of math and science. Gifted girls then do face the social concerns that I have mentioned. They are in classes where boys are encouraged and expected to succeed and where girls are tolerated if they are present. This is especially striking in grades 9 through 12.

To observe math classes of boys and girls in the high school grades is to note, first of all, that the higher the grade the fewer girls you will find. Those who are enrolled may most often be found literally taking a back seat, unless the instructor really does something about it. Just sit in on such a class in trigonometry, for example, or advanced algebra. See who does most of the talking,--the teacher, the boys, or the girls. See who volunteers to work at the board. Who challenges an example or a solution for a problem. Even those girls who are

enrolled beyond the required courses in math usually are seen as being relatively passive in their class involvement. Not that they cannot or do not do the work; they are quietly and subtly allowed to be in the class, without the opportunity to share fully in it.

It's fine to boast of the increased numbers of women in college and university math and science courses. In terms of the real possibilities, the increase is pitiful. What about the real need, which is for more girls in such courses in the junior high and high schools? This is where their absence and sense of discouragement is felt later in the colleges, in their life careers, and in their sense of fulfillment as members of our society.

My answer is to propose what I have already determined does make a difference. We found our gifted girls in the Cal State San Bernardino region and invited them to enroll for a summer program in math for girls only! They flocked like hungry birds. With an excellent woman instructor, 23 girls spent three weeks in a general math orientation class, working on number systems, on probability, on statistical games, and on feeling terrific about themselves in math. They wanted more. And more than three weeks. And so did their parents! What next, they demanded!

Most of us agree that in such situation, the key may well be the female role model who knows what is needed. As a teacher, this woman is expert in her field and interested in the improvement of girls <u>in this field</u>. She thus serves as a warm, supportive, knowledgeable symbol of what any of the girls can become. Our need is to establish this kind of teacher in such

classes.

It is true that the more we enable girls to become math people and science people as a result of such programs, the more we find a need for some of them to teach the next generation of gifted girls. At the same time, with increasing numbers of women trained in the professions, we find that the competition and demand for their services set the schools and industry against each other. Will they come to teach or will they enter business, industry, government service, and so on?

Who wins out in that competition may determine how well we will be able to continue to expand the opportunities for gifted girls in the schools and in later life. That dilemma is probably still some distance away out there in the future.

We need more such opportunities wherever and whenever we can make them. Let's suggest to a large junior high school that for 7th grade math, we offer one section for girls only and one for a co-ed group. Make sure that the teacher, man or woman, truly feels comfortable teaching a class of girls only in math. And see who enrolls.

Be sure no one considers one section "easier" or with lower standards than the other. And, of course, if the groups are both identified as gifted--in similar terms--we have the makings of an important test of the value of the idea. Best of all, students in neither group can be negatively affected.

Talk this up in your district. Give your considered reasons for using this approach. Try it out and be sure to check on it, during the sessions with parent meetings, use real-time questionnaires with the students, work with the teachers to be

sure they have all the help they wish. Then do some objective follow-up after the experience. Evaluate the experience, with the students, the teachers, the parents. Keep everyone informed and take the next step: offer the same options to 8th graders and so on. Note the persistence of girls who, following their experiences in such activities, are willing to take on the next levels of algebra, trig, pre-calculus, and calculus. We may find that colleges and universities will be surprised by the new crop of women in majors that have been underenrolled.

As to those SAT scores where girls score less often in the high ranges than do boys, let's not be too quick to claim a genetic problem for girls. Early experiences, intensive activity, and hard work, may prove that girls suffer no intrinsic handicaps in math or the sciences. In any case, we must work on these matters as if they do matter. And they do. Women astronauts should not be seen as so very unique and unexpected people. They should have plenty of colleagues, both male and female in this profession.

To sum up on this matter that needs fixing, the problem begins early and we must all work on it together. For our sake and for the sake of girls and women.

Let's pick up another matter that should be looked at. We find our high achieving gifted in our classes and we try to make sure that they will continue to do 12 years of schooling in 12 years. None of this skipping. It's old fashioned. It cheats the gifted child of his childhood. It makes for emotional distress and we should avoid it at all costs.

With girls and boys who are testing and working at 2 years above grade or more, what the teachers try to do is give them special attention. Too often, this means more work--which they can already do with one hand tied behind their backs. They say, okay, go and explore beyond this grade's work in math, or in the language arts. Do more things in social studies, and I'll keep track of you.

It doesn't work, neither for the child nor for the teacher.

And notice that in this discussion of acceleration or skipping, very little is said about girls. This is where we seem to see mostly boys. If skipping is provided, boys are and girls are not!

The values of acceleration in a subject or in a full grade have been thoroughly explored and they do not hurt the child who moves ahead to be with older children on a more advanced curriculum. Boys who have skipped a grade, or even two, do not suffer from social neglect, or from emotional distress, or even from the height-weight discrepancy. They have been observed as making their way in subject matter, as making their way with the other kids, and with the teachers. What about the girls? Doesn't this apply to them as well? It would if there were more of them who received this opportunity.

In each case, the possibility of skipping a grade in the elementary level should be looked at. There can be pro's and con's. Is the child fearful? Are the parents seriously in doubt? What does the next teacher know about the research on acceleration of gifted? Not what does he or she feel? My suggestion is that grade-skipping is best done and most

effectively for the sake of the child in the elementary school. Subject matter skipping at that level is difficult and involves more paper work for the teachers and more moving around for the child.

Let's remember that the idea of the 12-year school is not written in concrete. Many of us have done it in less time and have enjoyed earlier entrance in high school with good adjustment and, certainly, the literature shows many situations of early entrance to the university with equally good value for the learner. We need to stress one interesting concern. And that is that with early completion of one's basic education, the professional and career development need not wait until the student is well along in his adult life. We see too many young professionals who have had to postpone social and family life into their thirties while lower-achieving peers begin such life activities earlier.

The problem for women is even more serious, since a woman is, traditionally, expected to be married or on the road to matrimony in her very early twenties. Although there are greater numbers of gifted women who postpone marriage for education and a career, many other gifted girls drop out of education and seek the traditional and expected path. For such girls, the benefits of acceleration are indeed promising. For them, we can almost say, she CAN have one as well as the other, and the earlier the better.

The penalty of the educational treadmill for the gifted student is unfair! Especially so for girls and women.

What I prefer to suggest, in addition, is that when we find

a candidate for skipping a grade, we ought to look for more than one. If possible, accelerate two or three or more. This is desirable because in most cases, a gifted child who moves up a grade is still going to be in a class of normal range. With two or more such skippers, they have an opportunity to work in one of the so-called advanced groups of the class. They can work together on the projects that come up. And, they can spark off each other in the new situation so that the work of the class is still not as easy as it is for the single advanced child. We have found that even accelerated gifted children find the next grade fairly easy.

Let's look differently then at the concept of acceleration and grade skipping. We should also recognize that beyond the elementary school, acceleration by subject matter is also a reasonable possibility for gifted students. In math it may not be necessary for certain ones to spend a whole year on plane geometry. Why not do it, learn it, with home study and with tutors and special help from the teacher. Then test for the achieved skills of plane geometry and move forward the next levels in mathematics.

We may take the same approach in a foreign language, in chemistry or biology or physics. When the student has done all the skills and knowledge of a subject his or her school offers, be sure to test for it and then see what the nearest college has available for high achievers, regardless of their age.

Parenthetically, when I say, test for it, I definitely mean the use of a standardized national-level test,--if possible, the College Board tests, though others will do.

We know of many high school kids who do beautifully in their schools. They are active in sports, in school papers, in the band or choir, in clubs, and then, having a high level of achievement in a subject, they take a course at the local college. On later admission to the college of their choice, they are able to use these early credits to go on to other subjects or to more advanced work in one or more fields.

Let's move to another aspect of this topic that often needs attention. I want to discuss the matter of gifted students who specialize quite early and, having chosen their so-called field of interest, do that and nothing else. All too often, we find such students who know well one or two related academic subjects, but do not express an interest in much else.

I call this the syndrome of discrepancy: there are too many areas where gifted girls and boys have too little knowledge or experience, or interest. Knowing math and science, they may know nothing about history and the arts, or vice versa. They lack awareness of the politics and economics of the society in which they live. Their primary areas of skill and high ability overshadow other areas in which they ought to be involved. I am troubled by the gifted who feel they cannot take part in games along with their age peers. They figure out how to avoid them, how to compensate, and how to get along. But they get along and miss out.

All our citizens, from the elementary grades upward, ought to enjoy a full, broad-based exposure to liberal studies and the arts. It's too easy for our gifted to stick to what they do well and, doing well, that's all they want to do. The empty spaces in

their experience constitute the discrepancies to which we should give attention.

For girls in the matter of discrepancy, the stereotypes are both constructed and reinforced. Should she specialize in both math and science, or one of the above? It is too common for girls, fearful of their assumed loss of femininity, to avoid the math and go for the soft sciences and the literary arts. Again, I prefer that there be the widest, most viable perceptions for girls across the board. Let us begin to work for and to speak of the Renaissance Woman for a change!

On the basis of my research, I have developed a discrepancy model which enlists teachers, parents, and the gifted students in defining those areas in which the individual has little or no skill or experience. Looking at the questionnaires, one may then find the aspects which call for attention. This may be the responsibility of the school or the family, or both. But it is an important procedure in order that the gifted student not be encouraged to omit from his or her life those other activities in which he may or may not be gifted. The experience of trying new activities, whether they be athletic, musical, artistic, journalistic, or mechanical, is as important as that of continuing to strengthen those aspects which have already been proven as exceptional.

Filling in the gaps for the gifted is another concern which we should be looking at because it does need fixing, for girls and for boys.

A few words on the use of the IQ as an identifying means in gifted programs. It's a good idea if you use the individual test

rather than the group test. The latter is only generally indicative and while it is cheaper to do, its results are less than reliable. The problem with the individual test is that it is quite expensive. I would suggest we only do it when we can consider it very very important and when we have no other means of identifying gifted students. It is just as effective to use the results of achievement tests, plus the observations of teachers, plus--and this is very important--the reports of parents about the child's development.

Standardized achievement test scores correlate in a consistent and positive manner with IQ test scores. Let's use them for the greatest part of our identifying procedures.

If we are looking for other forms of giftedness, we can note productivity in music and the arts, provided as many children as possible have been able to experience those activities. Children do come with artistic skills and musical facilities that we certainly did not teach in the schools. Giftedness in other areas, such as leadership, is still, in my view, quite a subjective matter. It is one that tends to omit girls almost entirely. Look at your classes of boys and girls. Who are the leaders? Boys aggressive, girls submissive. Boys leaders, girls followers. The roles are once again stereotyped.

We can use sociometric techniques to identify class leaders, the most popular ones, the ones other kids prefer to work with or to call on for help. The real problem is what to do as a follow-up. Do we give more leadership "work" to those so identified? Do we look for ways to develop them as democratic

leaders instead of as leaders of gangs, as small-time monarchs, or as contras in the classroom and school? The area calls for more study and more research. But the point of greatest pay-off is in identifying those who can get the greatest benefit from the experiences the school should be offering, particularly in seeing where girls can be leaders in co-ed groups. Where girls are encouraged to gain the respect and followership of all their peers, not just of other girls.

The Ferraro candidacy is a case in point. It was aimed, unfortunately I feel, in part at voting women of both parties and the unaffiliated women. A truer reflection of worth would come in the nomination of a woman for this presidency and others ahead of us. I know, we--meaning who?--are not yet ready for this.

As it turns out, Great Britain, India, Israel, and others have preceded us in this

Now, a few comments about a word that is so common among us: that is ENRICHMENT. To most of us it means that the teacher is expected to provide for the gifted child who happens to be in his or class in some special way. This is to avoid boredom, to prevent the child from becoming a "troublemaker", and to keep the child occupied while the rest of the class goes on with its business.

I have observed that girls mark papers for the teacher; they set up bulletin boards, arrange flowers, cut out decorations. For enrichment, girls are invited to explore family life in the middle ages, to look up the biographies of famous women, to examine the early levels of the soft science. At the same time, boys really do get turned loose in all those other

interesting, male-type directions.

As a matter of fact, I have seen enrichment in so many different forms and in so many different activities, that I have come to believe that it has only the meaning that the teacher gives to it at any particular time, even when it is not sex-stereotyped. I am not, of course, against those activities for the gifted that broaden and extend their experiences. Gifted children work well in exploring new areas, new topics, new forms of human endeavor. But let's be certain that enrichment is in fact not just more of the same, that it is not a matter of go to it, kids, and we'll talk about when you're done. Especially, let us be very careful not to reinforce further the notion that <u>this</u> is what girls ought to be doing as enrichment, but not <u>that</u>. <u>That</u> is for boys!

Anything a child does is worthy of good planning, sequential activity with evaluation and review, sharing and expressing in some form of communication, and ultimate progression to further work along those or similar lines.

Enrichment, therefore, cannot be an off-the-cuff matter. Nor can it be one thing for girls and another for boys. In any case, it ought to be fully supported by teacher involvement, by the good use of periodicals, books, and other data. And it must be open to examination as to whether it was, in fact, a worthwhile activity.

I should add that our current enchantment with computers may be a Pied Piper experience that deters our children from their rightful broader experierce. Not all gifted children, just like anyone else, need to be involved in what makes the computer

run. Some should be. Not all. They should know what we can do with them, how to communicate with one, how to get the best out of a program, and when not to have anything to do with that computer.

Watch a group of youngsters working at the keyboards. Do you find the girls sitting and pounding the keys, with the boys standing behind them, watching? Try again. The girls may get their turns, especially when the group is all girls. But when the group is mixed, see what takes place. Who is active, talking to the computer, and who maybe eventually gets a turn at it?

Regardless of whether they are boys or girls, I've seen gifted children spend too much time playing games and using the programs for the most simple activities when they would be better off developing their thinking skills. The power to reason needs to be worked on, with other children, with adults, and with books. Then, perhaps, the reasoning of the human can determine the uses of computers. I'm somewhat skeptical when I'm told that without a computer your child won't make it into college. Or get his or her homework done. Or be successful in getting good grades.

No doubt about it, kids love to sit at those keyboards and watch the terminals. They will program the LOGO and the Turtle, and use basic to make up lists of telephone numbers of the kids in the class. But as the be-all and end-all for most kids, especially the gifted ones, there are too many other activities and experiences which are still there to be done.

The needs of gifted girls? First, they need our attention to their existence among us as gifted. Then we must recognize

the special complications of their lives,--they are hindered, discouraged, counseled out directly and by inference. They face social subtleties where surprise is shown at their abilities and talents, and where reluctance is the hallmark of their acceptance.

Gifted girls and boys, like others, live in a demanding, serious world. They are good at learning and at working hard to understand that world. But they cannot move forward entirely on their own. They need us. They need our suggestions, our skill at introducing them to humor and wit, as well as our serious guidance.

From teachers, they need respect and the recognition that their self-doubts, fears, and lacks of total security depend on these school professionals. From school principals, supervisors, directors, they need the assurance that their teachers are not solitary workers in the wilderness, and that the stereotypes are on the road to extinction.

These kids may be the teachers of us all, tomorrow, and they are as important as anything else the schools do. Gifted kids do not make the schools obsolete. On the contrary, they are one more good reason for school people, and school boards, to make their best efforts on their behalf.

As to parents, how often do parents have to be reminded of their first obligations. Which are to the happiness and good health of their children AND of their families. Parents must know their gifted children, without illusions, and especially without requiring those kids to pay an emotional price for their special abilities. First priority, love that child. Just as he

or she is. Be aware of how you may be joining the explicit or the subtle discouragement of girls from participating fully in all that society should provide.

Second, join the schools in their efforts to give that child the best possible education. Third, encourage the schools to keep up to date. Know the myths about giftedness and gifted girls, and let the school people challenge and disprove those myths, rather than follow them.

Finally, find the school that is just right for your child. That selection can become your shared involvement. Parents should be able to judge the experiences of their children in school and then do something about them.

Once you've found the place and your gifted child's education is in good hands, keep on making home that same kind of place, too. You have your allies, your partners, and the rest is up to you and us.

The girls for whom we are responsible need our best and most imaginative efforts. The fight on their behalf is often more difficult than that for gifted boys--our society being what it is. Nevertheless, it is an important fight in a most difficult arena. We owe it to ourselves, to the girls, and to our society to undertake the battle. In this cause, we must extend ourselves to the utmost, be our most creative, and, together with our allies, see to it that we are successful.

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